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# Mirror City

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February 2020

An exegesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree  
of Master of Fine Arts at Massey University Wellington, New Zealand

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## **1. Abstract**

Through an autobiographical approach, *Mirror City* sets out to imaginatively investigate the twin notions of home and the contemporary experience of young people in my home town of Wellington.

Embracing photography's unique role as both document and also a vehicle of imagination, this series of black and white photographs of young people and their environment has been mapped into new constellations using the forms of the photobook and exhibition installation together.

While rooted in the lineage of documentary photography, *Mirror City* questions traditional understandings of documentary photography's truth claim, and instead attempts to situate the work into more literary ends. Drawing on notions of home, the New Zealand gothic, concepts of hauntology and contemporary documentary practice, *Mirror City* seeks to synthesize these ideas into a layered and refined body of work that speaks to shifting understandings of home or place, and the uncertainty of being a young person growing up in Aotearoa now.

## **2. Introduction**

*“Like all those who are separated from their country, I dream of home. I dream of New Zealand. This is what I imagine when I am away; this lonely place... its magical silence, its haunting emptiness...this lonely road, through this indifferent landscape... I now have a permit to dream cinematic images of our own place. And this is my place.”*

(Neill, *Cinema of Unease*, 1995)

I started working on this photography-based research project, *Mirror City*, during a sustained burst of interest in my hometown of Whanganui-A-Tara Wellington, New Zealand. After spending much of my late teens and most of my twenties bouncing between Aotearoa, Australia, England and further afield, living an unsettled and transient existence, I came back to this place which represented home for me. On my return I encountered a peculiar feeling: unexpectedly, ‘home’ felt strangely unfamiliar to me. This generated a desire to investigate both this place and my uncanny sense of simultaneous belonging and non-belonging. This was the departure point for *Mirror City*.

When I began this project, I was particularly interested in two different, yet related ideas. Firstly, the changeable and transient notion of home I had recently experienced, and secondly, the uncertainty of growing up in New Zealand at this turbulent time in human history. These were the two threads I began this project with. How did these things intertwine? What were the dreams and anxieties of young people growing up here now? What did this place mean to me now? How had my relationship to it changed? What were the common threads between my experience and a wider audience? And how did this project fit into my wider concerns and practice? How can photography as an expressive and communicative medium articulate these feelings, relationships and concerns? How can documentary photography be aimed towards more lyrical ends? These were the kinds of questions that I began to ask myself.

I commenced this project in a place of uncertainty and curiosity and set out not knowing where it was going to lead. It began with a need to walk the roads of my youth, and a desire to meet some of the young people who inhabited this place. I recorded the scenes, places and faces I found with my camera, as a way of trying to understand this place, the people who live here and my place within it.

Beginning in this open-ended way, I made photographs of young people I encountered in my daily life, and documented vernacular places I passed on my various routes around the city. The research and practical aspects of this project became intertwined, and iterative. One picture led to the next, aspects of my research seeped into the pictures I made, and the pictures began to inform the research. This led me to read books and view movies that dealt with growing up (the coming of age novel, the bildungsroman film), as well as academic writing on notions of 'home' by Lucy Lippard and others. I engaged with Mark Fisher's notion of hauntology, and researched different theorists and artists understandings of the New Zealand gothic tradition. I had critiques with prominent curators and academics; I talked to and spent time with the young people I encountered in my day-to-day life at university, and in the streets. I kept an ongoing stream of my thoughts, notes and observations, collected throughout the project, on my iPhone (which later became the type-based cover of the *Mirror City* photobook).

While this project is constructed from pictures made of the real world, it is closer to a fiction in its aim. Taking seemingly unconnected images and bringing them together into an ambiguous narrative, with no written factual information supplied with the images. In this way I believe photography can operate in a more imaginative, or "literary" or lyrical form, in a similar approach to short stories, novels or poetry (although perhaps with more ambiguity around narrative). *Mirror City* is not a history or a survey: nor does it have journalistic concerns. It is an idiosyncratic fiction, it is a personal view, a necessarily skewed, altered, and unbalanced interpretation.

This project has drawn heavily upon various traditions which I have mined as part of my practice. Chapters of this writing cover how my work engages with the power of the everyday, the documentary tradition, the New Zealand gothic movement, my works relationship with hauntology, and the concepts of place and home. The writing elucidates my process of work, and the resulting presentation of a photobook complemented by a series of large-scale photographs.

My practice comes from a compulsion to record what I encounter on a daily basis as a way to examine the everyday world around me. It is a personal endeavour to make meaning of the world. My aim is to blur the line between art and my everyday life, therefore I utilise my daily experience as part of my research and making practice. My method involves moving through the world and observing, responding to scenes, objects and people, by recording them with my camera, which in turn, may bring “*overlooked aspects of lived experience into visibility.*” (Johnstone, 2008, p 12)

This autobiographical or self-reflexive approach is often intuitive, responding to different things that register with me emotionally or psychologically, whether it be the atmosphere of a place, quality of light, an expression on a stranger’s face or something unexpected within an ordinary scene. In making this work I try to be open to what the world may offer when I look at it deeply, embracing photography’s inherent relationship with chance. This type of practice is embedded in the history of observational art, specifically movements like street or documentary photography. However in some conflict with my initial compulsion to observe and record, is my desire to create a semi ‘fictional world’ through the presentation of still images that engage with narrative and concepts through the careful editing and curating, of a particular series. Along with this comes a recognition of the unsuitability of documentary photography to show a definitive ‘truth’. I am able to present only my version of the world. This synthesis of aspects of documentary photography with a literary or fictional

approach became a way to bring *Mirror City* into a more personal territory, freed from the expectations of the 'document'. The seed for this idea was proposed in 1967 by John Szarkowski when he introduced the seminal *New Documents* exhibition at MOMA where he said a new generation of photographers would put documentary strategies towards more personal aims.

I have a personal connection to both the place and group of people I am depicting. Young people face a specific set of challenges for the future. On top of routine dreams and anxiety of those formative years, they face a torrent of negative media about climate change, pollution, inequality, housing, job security and division. These growing uncertainty and anxieties about the future directly relate to the notion of hauntology as discussed by Mark Fisher.

Ultimately, my aim became to employ photography's transformative power to elevate and interrogate everyday life and encourage a more complex and contemplative perspective on the place I call home at this turbulent time. *Mirror City* is my life reflected in the experience of young people inhabiting this whenua, and growing up in a time of uncertain futures.

### **3. Normal strangeness: everyday mysteries**

*“The banal, the quotidian, the obvious, the common, the ordinary, the habitual ... How are we to speak of these common things, how to track them down? ... How to give them meaning, a tongue to let them finally speak of what it is, of who we are?”*

*(Johnstone, 2008, p 6)*

Sitting in opposition to notions of the exotic or extraordinary, the rise of depictions of everyday life in art could be seen as a way to raise the importance of the mundane. Intense observations and reflection on commonplace life may provide insights into our world, and in turn help both photographer and viewer gain a greater understanding of home and place. Stephen Johnstone argues that artists should attempt to merge art with their lives by examining the everyday world around us. He says that this may bring disregarded parts of the mundane experience into visibility, which in turn helps us have a deeper understanding of home, and ourselves, and other issues that are often overlooked as we go about the routine habits of our everyday lives (Johnstone, 2008, p 12).

I have always been drawn to artwork that interrogates and depicts what may usually be considered ordinary or mundane. I propose that our own everyday lives can be sources of artistic inspiration, and that we do not need to travel to far flung places to find interesting subject matter. British photographer John Myers, whose work engages aspects of the quotidian, says we should attempt to *“come to terms with the world we live in”* instead of catering to what others insist is interesting, we should attempt to find interest in the seemingly mundane vernacular of the everyday experience around us. Myers made photographs of garages, TVs, electricity substations, suburban homes and his neighbours, which were all photographed in his immediate environment of Stourbridge, England, in the 1970s and 1980s. Myers said *“When I walked out of my front door I didn’t see the Rocky Mountains over the road...I saw the substation on*

*the corner and the pub. If I walked down the street, I saw a new house being built.” (Smythe, 2018.)*



**Figure 1**

John Myers

*Benjamin the Rabbit, 1975*

From *Looking at the Overlooked* (photobook)

Courtesy of the artist

Myers approaches the banal with genuine curiosity. In his recent publication *Looking At the Overlooked*, published in 2018 by RRB Books, Myers photographed the world he inhabited on a daily basis and yet he found visual and conceptual surprises in that world. A great example of this is the intriguing picture *Benjamin the Rabbit, 1975* (figure 1). In this black and white image two lawn chairs and an umbrella make a stage in the pale English sun, and a large rabbit is sprawled towards the right hand side of the frame, looking relaxed and enjoying the sun, air and grass.

As viewers we are invited to imagine; who lives here? What kind of people are they? What has happened or is about to happen? There is a certain open ended narrative strangeness, giving space to engage with, and speculate on, the work. Within the banality of a well mown suburban lawn, the combination of elements in the frame compel the viewer to actively look again at the strangeness in Myer's seemingly mundane neighbourhood. I aspire to record moments such as these, where documented reality and fiction converge. I am particularly interested in the ambiguities between documenting something and advancing its imaginary qualities for the viewer. For example having open-ended qualities in an artwork so it becomes an active site of imagination for the viewer. This compels the viewer to actively participate in the understanding of image.

Annette Messenger states that an artist does not invent anything: they indicate what is already there. She adds, artists illuminate what already exists in the world, by putting it into a different context or reformulating it. The attention and noticing is a key part of an artist's practice. (Johnstone, 2008, p 67). In this research project I am firstly noticing what exists in the real world in my daily life, then I use photography's transformative qualities to illuminate and elevate that scene, and finally by placing it into another context (the photobook or exhibition print) for a viewer to interpret.

The quotidian has become a key interest within contemporary art. Its popularity amongst artists however does not mean its relevance has been exhausted. The subject matter is seemingly endless in its interpretation or viewpoint as each generation is embedded within different political, social, and economic contexts. There is no single universal definition of 'the everyday' in art as every individual's experience of it is different. Therefore I am approaching this from an intensely subjective angle, presenting my own personal view of parts of my daily experience. Even though it is not a flawless concept, I believe exploring, considering and interrogating my everyday with a camera is a valid process that does not aim to portray a universal experience, but rather a specific one that others can engage with.

Photography is a democratic medium that lends itself well to recording and depicting ordinary life. William Eggleston is the ultimate democratic photographer who depicts the quotidian. To paraphrase Thomas Weski, the utter banality of much of Eggleston's subject matter rejected the art photography trends of the time. Eggleston's 'accidental snapshot' aesthetic makes his work seem spontaneous and informal, however, he had actually studied painting and carefully composed these images despite their seemingly candid nature. He photographed with the so called 'democratic' eye, treating 'every object worthy of depiction' and making no distinction between the beautiful and the banal (Eggleston, 2008, p 3-7). He created a new way of seeing the extraordinary in the ordinary.

Eggleston's photographs are seemingly casual; however they can be emotive, and psychologically evocative too. For example, Sean O'Hagan noted that the image *Greenwood, Mississippi, 1973*, (a bare light bulb depicted against a blood red ceiling) had '*...some indefinable sense of menace...*' (O'Hagan, 2004). His oeuvre is an important example of using photography to encourage the viewer to imaginatively re-examine the everyday world. Eggleston invites viewers to subjectively interpret the psychological or narrative implications of the seemingly every day scene. While Eggleston's photographs are seen as operating in the documentary lineage, they are intensely personal and subjective.

My project, *Mirror City* extends my ongoing interest in the search for intriguing moments that may be found when investigating the quotidian. In *Mirror City* spaces and objects found in my daily life are carefully recorded: including cars, houses, window displays, doors, fences, a laundromat and other scenes. For example, the photograph in figure 2 takes on the same subject matter as Eggleston's *Greenwood Mississippi, 1973*: the banality of a light fixture.



**Figure 2**

Harry Culy

*Untitled (light fixture), 2019, Mirror City*

From *Mirror City* (photobook)

Through my process of selecting and photographing a scene, editing, presenting, and carefully creating the context in which that photograph is seen, the mundane can be transformed into something more than just representations of surfaces. Figure 2 is carefully composed and photographed with a shallow depth of field, almost as if it is a portrait of a person, instead of an inanimate object. This light fixture is a strange almost semi-futuristic geometric shape, the slightly desolate and leafless trees in the background create a sense of winter, and also allude to horror or science fiction imagery. Dusty, and cobwebby, the light appears disused, and the fact that there is no lightbulb inside the fixture suggests an eerie, slightly dystopian atmosphere.

This photograph demonstrates my process explicitly. It illustrates the fortuitous chance of finding the subject matter within my daily life and using my photographic craft to enhance the narrative of the work, as well as creating the context in which the image is placed.

In C.S. Lewis's *Narnia* series, a lamppost in a forest symbolises the border between the real world and Narnia. To me, this light fixture symbolised an ordinary object from the real world, which has been transformed into a fictional world. In this case it is broken, symbolising a world that may be in disrepair and uncertainty. This image is placed at the very beginning of the *Mirror City* photobook and is a way to symbolize travelling into a world that is removed from our own.



**Figure 3**

Harry Culy

*Untitled (Deme), 2019, Mirror City*

From *Mirror City* (photobook)

Further to this aim of finding intrigue in the mundane, I have photographed people who are engaged in seemingly uninteresting and banal activities. For example, in figure 3, a young woman sits on a curb with a can of fizzy drink gazing listlessly into the lens, she is caught in between actions, and in an unspectacular roadside location, this open-ended photograph leaves the viewer with unanswered questions.



**Figure 4**

Harry Culy

*Untitled (house with topiary), 2019, Mirror City*

From *Mirror City* (photobook)

In figure 4 a classic weatherboard house is shown in bright afternoon sunshine, the colour stripped away in monochromatic film. Framed by carefully trimmed hedges and topiary, the house lies still and perfectly maintained. The fence is a physical barrier between the viewer and the house, while the doors and windows are shut, and the curtains are drawn. There has been human activity recently, but where are the people who live here now? The traces of people and now their absence suggests to the viewer an

unsettling or desolate mood to this otherwise ordinary suburban scene. This image echoes my interest in how, by deeply looking at the everyday world around us, and recording these scenes with a camera, new imaginary and strange fictions can be conjured up in the mind of the viewer or maker. Behind the depictions of the everyday in *Mirror City*, lurk questions, unease and mystery.

#### 4. Witness: situating my work in the lineage of documentary photography

*“Most of those who were called documentary photographers a generation ago . . . made their pictures in the service of a social cause. . . . to show what was wrong with the world, and to persuade their fellows to take action and make it right. . . . [A] new generation of photographers has directed the documentary approach toward more personal ends. Their aim has not been to reform life, but to know it. Their work betrays a sympathy—almost an affection—for the imperfections and the frailties of society. They like the real world, in spite of its terrors, as the source of all wonder and fascination and value—no less precious for being irrational. . . . What they hold in common is the belief that the commonplace is really worth looking at, and the courage to look at it with a minimum of theorizing.”*

(Wall text, *New Documents* curated by John Szarkowski, 1967, Museum of Modern Art, New York)

The genre of new documentary photography is an important part of photographic history that informs my work because my practice is a largely subjective one, devoid of journalistic ambitions, even though the subject matter is drawn from the ‘real’ world. New documentary photography was coined in the 1960s by John Szarkowski, with the genre encouraging a more subjective view of the world than previous styles of documentary photography. Szarkowski curated the seminal *New Documents* exhibition in 1967 at MOMA, featuring Diane Arbus, Lee Friedlander, and Gary Winogrand.

Szarkowski says the photographers in the *New Documents* exhibition aimed to make the work more personal and instead of trying to change the world, they were using the documentary approach, to “*...know life...*”. He adds that the work of Winogrand, Arbus, and Friedlander has an “*...an affection...*” for the imperfections found in the world, adding that they are curious and find fascination in both the beauty and ugliness of the real world. He says what

Arbus, Winogrand and Friedlander have in common is “... *the belief that the commonplace is really worth looking at, and the courage to look at it with a minimum of theorizing.*” (Rosler, 2004, p 189). In the 1960s this was a rather novel way of using the documentary genre, which was closely tied to objectivity and journalism. This new way of working opened up the scene to a freer and more personal style. Even though this is a somewhat traditional approach now, I believe it is still a valid and important part of contemporary photography, embracing the subjectivity inherent in the medium.

This personal approach to documentary photography and the idea that the “...*commonplace is really worth looking at..*” gave me the confidence and impetus to explore my daily life, and the scenes and people found within it, as serious subject matter. I have photographed freely and without genre restrictions or imposed expectations, having the ability to move between portraiture, landscape, interior and still-life scenes in different locations throughout Wellington. These images have been collected through experimentation and intuitive approaches, as “*a kind of hunter-gatherer approach*” (Campany, 2003, p 110) and made into a large archive of over 400 sheets of 4x5 inch film. This project began very open-ended conceptually. Involving trust in both the unknown and my ability, I allowed it to shape itself and develop thematically as it continued. Many photographers who work in the contemporary street documentary tradition still use this approach (Mark Steinmetz, Vanessa Winship, Gregory Halpern) as they believe that starting a project which is too predetermined may reduce chance encounters, which I argue is an inherent part of photographic nature. The collecting part was the first step in the process of making this work. A large part of the work involved editing, testing, experimenting and sequencing after this rather flexible collecting process.

There are clear links between the notion of the everyday, the genre of new documentary photography and more broadly the genre of street photography. Street photography is often linked to the concept of the flaneur, which usually

focusses on observing everyday life in public places. While the genre of street photography provides an interesting framework for a body of work (being linked to chance, narrative, changing backdrops, subject matter and people) it may also be problematic (which is discussed later in this chapter).

The flaneur by definition must spend time in the spaces they are searching, they must connect with the environment and the people who live in it. Susan Sontag calls the flaneur variously a 'solitary walker' and a 'voyeuristic stroller', describing them as 'stalking' or 'cruising' which seem negative, predatory terms. Yet she also refers to the 'joys of watching', and a recognition of the photographer making the world picturesque (Sontag. 1977, p. 55). This apparent contradiction speaks to photography's role as both a medium which takes from its subjects, but can also bring great joy through its process and results.

I acknowledge that my practice is deeply embedded in traditional notions of documentary and street photography, however it also engages with new ways of using documentary practice beyond the traditional. The traditional rules that once surrounded documentary photography continue to be challenged through various methodologies, strategies and technologies. A local example of a mix of traditional documentary and digital manipulation is seen in Shaun Waugh's *Covenant Cut Outs*, figure 5. These are made from traditional documentary style landscape photographs, however they are moved beyond the traditional by the artists use of digital alteration. Waugh digitally cuts and artificially colours pictures of land that has recently gained a QEII covenant to accentuate the artifice of this action of returning sections of agricultural land to so called natural states.



**Figure 5**

Shaun Waugh

*Covenant cut-outs, 2012-2014*

Installation view, 24 framed archival pigment prints

Courtesy of the artist and NMG Gallery, Christchurch & Arrowtown

While very different to the way in that I work in *Mirror City*, Waugh shows one of the many ways in which documentary photography can be reinterpreted. In *Mirror City* I have mixed both traditional documentary style imagery, with more constructed scenes too. This strategy has been used to accentuate key notions of dislocation, and strangeness within the ordinary. For example in figure 6, I noticed a smart phone screen cover stuck to a window in a location that I could not photograph. I could not get the image or its symbolic richness out of my head, this prompted me to re-stage the scene in a new location which I could photograph. While a traditional documentary photographer would be uncomfortable constructing an image in this way, I am happy to use a degree of the staged within my photography.



**Figure 6**

Harry Culy

*Untitled (screen protector), 2019, Mirror City*

From *Mirror City* (photobook)

Additionally, I have intentionally used titles with very little factual information, have not specified locations, and I have provided little writing to contextualise the work – apart from the fragmented text collage found on the cover of the book. Traditional documentary or journalistic uses of photography were utilised to illustrate, persuade and inform, whereas my work in *Mirror City* is much more open ended, prompting the viewer to imaginatively engage with the ambiguities present in the work. Contemporary photobook maker Gregory Halpern expresses this idea; “*My work has moved away from more traditional notions of documentary and closer to forms of fiction.*” (Halpern, 2018).



**Figure 7**

Harry Culy

*Photobook trial layouts, 2019, Mirror City*

A useful way to consider documentary photography is to use Bill Nichols' description of the six modes of documentary film. I argue these concepts can be applied to still photography as well. They are useful in teasing out a more nuanced approach to documentary photography. Nichols defines the six modes as: *poetic, expository, participatory, observational, reflexive, and performative*. These modes may overlap and are not self-exclusive. In my practice I especially recognise the *observational, participatory and poetic* modes. *Mirror City* utilises the participatory mode because I have utilised my own experience and uses the observational mode through observing the minutiae of my lived experience. The poetic mode especially emphasised in *Mirror City* with a more subjective interpretation, usually employing a non-linear narrative, and a focus on atmosphere, mood, rhythm and emotional qualities. Nichols says the poetic mode does not rely on straight forward narratives, instead it investigates “*associations and patterns that involve temporal rhythms and spatial juxtapositions.*” (Nichols, 2001). This is especially relevant to my

work in the photobook form, where I am engaging with rhythm, mood, and layout through an extended series. For example I have carefully sequenced the images relating to light and dark, landscape and portrait, close up and long shots of scenes to engage the viewer in this narrative.

Through my early exploratory work for this project I created a broad set of limitations in which to build my concepts, focussing on young people (from teenagers to young adults in their twenties) in the geographical area of Wellington, however still remaining open to what I may encounter outside these parameters, not shutting myself off from what chance opportunities the world may offer. My methodology for picture making for this project is to explore and photograph places and people in my immediate environment, within my daily life through short journeys by foot and car. I approached this project using autobiographical and personal experiences as a basis for research. Carolyn Ellis defines this as "*research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political.*" (Ellis, 2004, p 19)

Seemingly at odds to the methodology of wandering, the photographs in this project were made with a large and cumbersome analogue 4x5 inch view camera. I wanted to use a single photographic technology because my subject matter would be wide ranging, with the aim that this would create a sense of cohesiveness through being shot on the same film, and with the same camera with a 150mm lens. This is approximately the same width of view as the human eye, which I have used as a way to emulate the way people see. Each photograph takes time and physical work to make. The camera has to be operated on a tripod, and takes time to be set up, which lends itself to a slow way of looking and also creates a preternatural sense of stillness in the imagery. The methodology also moderates the response of the human subjects, as they must stay still for a long period of time, leading to a sense of being statue-like, or being stuck in time.

Although initially associated with traditional photojournalism, in modern times, monochrome photography is more associated with a sense of the past. In this case I wanted to harness this idea to add to a sense of a-temporality and timelessness. Grayscale imagery has also been associated with melancholy, and a sense of hauntedness which echoed the themes I was exploring. The use of black and white strips the world of its usual colour, moving the world within the frame away from the real. However, an interesting contrast to this is that the 4x5 inch negatives used produce extremely highly detailed images, and lend a sense of hyper reality, placing the pictures on the edge of reality and fiction.



**Figure 8**

Harry Culy

*Untitled (Eilish), 2019, Mirror City*

From *Mirror City* (photobook)

The age group I chose to work with is often in a heightened state of transition, between late childhood and adulthood where people are exploring their identities, their education and careers, home and family. To me they symbolise the future, and also the notion of transition and metamorphosis.

Figure 8, is set in a suburban backyard. In a seemingly traditional three quarter portrait, a young woman looks straight into the lens of the camera, the shallow depth of field separates her from her background, but the blurry objects behind her make up her environment. A slightly neglected backyard, with a small shed, and weatherboard houses beyond. The intensity of her stare made me choose this particular image, which was open ended yet compelled the viewer to imagine what she may be thinking, and question who she is.

The approach to photography I have chosen to employ is not without its ethical challenges. Photography may be used to construct notions of place and people and can be used (consciously or unconsciously) to perpetuate myths or stereotypes. Communities of people and their images may be treated insensitively by a photographic tourist, or potentially depicted in unfair or stereotypical modes. *Mirror City*, while set in Wellington, does not seek to make objective assumptions about an entire place or group of people, and even though it is based in the lineage of documentary photography, it is closer to a fictional representation rather than a factual one.

Benedict Anderson, in his book *Imagined Communities*, argues that national identity or nationhood is a socially constructed concept, often out of touch with the reality of a country. Anderson states that this notion of community is imagined because an individual will never fully know and understand all individuals from a particular community. "... yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each" and that, "the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" . Anderson states that our imagined sense of community may be very different from the reality of it, as "inequality and

*exploitation*” usually exists. Community usually exists in the mind as a kind of deep sense of connectedness, yet we are often disconnected from one another (Anderson,1991, p7).

While not a completely perfect solution, I have attempted to ameliorate these issues by collaborating with the people in my photographs. The limitations and slowness photographing on a large camera means that portraits are made in cooperation with the people I photograph as they have the time to consciously present themselves to the camera. Secondly I received approval from the human subjects depicted in this project through thorough communication. Additionally my objective is not to represent all those in Wellington, but to engage with a tiny selection of young people who live here. *Mirror City* remains a subjective work.

One note I have received through the creation of this work is that some of portraits may be aligned to fashion photography trends. The generation I am depicting have grown up around social media and digital photography and are often used to having their photographs taken, image is important for them. Fashion photography has co-opted a documentary aesthetic (as well as many other photographic genres) and any similarity is likely because I am drawing on similar precedents as fashion photographers, such as August Saunder, Dana Lixenberg and others, and my subjects are visually aware of fashion imagery.

My cohort of subjects were all found in my daily life, some known and some unknown to me previously. I was drawn to each of them intuitively. They come from different backgrounds, some well off and some not, they are of different genders, and varied ethnicities. I chose to present a certain ambiguity to their backgrounds and their futures which made the portraits open to interpretation.

In *Mirror City* I have often used a deadpan approach with my image making, as a way to visually evoke a feeling of detachment. Deadpan photography has largely been cited as being devoid of emotion, or as an ‘indifference’ to the

subject matter. This mode of photography is used widely in contemporary photography (for example Rineke Dijkstra and Alec Soth). Often presented as highly descriptive large scale prints “*These pictures may engage us with emotive subjects, but our sense of what the photographers’ emotion might be is not the obvious guide to understanding the meaning of the images*” (Cotton, 2004, p 81). Deadpan gives space for the viewer to build their own meaning without being directed too much through photographic technique.



**Figure 9**

Alec Soth

*Melissa, 2005*

From *Niagra* (photobook)

Courtesy of the artist

A key artist of influence for me is Alec Soth. He mixes many different kinds of deadpan images to engage with certain thematic concerns, especially in his series *Niagara*. Soth mixed portraits, still lifes, and landscape genres as well as found love letters to explore the themes of romantic love and loss, using Niagara as a backdrop. In *Melissa, 2005*, Soth presents a woman on her wedding day, which should be a happy day, however she seems devoid of emotion, and she is juxtaposed with the mundane background of a motel. The deadpan approach to the subject matter creates an interesting juxtaposition for the viewer when attempting to interpret this work.

The portraits I have made often have deadpan qualities; they tend to be rather formally composed and are imbued with a sense of stillness and the emotion of the sitter is understated, and they are often depicted central to the frame. I tried to capture individuals when they were introspective so the viewer has to work to imagine what they may be thinking. While these photographs may look 'straight' or 'deadpan', this style of photography is not necessarily the obvious guide to how the viewer may understand the work. In deadpan photography the photographer is almost using a subterfuge to provoke a different understanding, by pretending to remove their own emotion from the image. There is an interesting juxtaposition when deadpan images are used in conjunction with a personal or subjective subject matter, this may add to a sense of ambiguity and confusion, which became key themes I wanted to communicate to a viewer.

In addition to the portraits (the subjects of which are the protagonists in the world I am creating) I have made deadpan images of suburban and urban life including sites that imply upheaval and transformation and may add to the narrative of transition and uncertainty. Often these places and things are relatively anonymous, avoiding highly recognisable sites in Wellington. In general I avoided iconic Wellington sites as it jars the viewer (especially local viewers) out of the fictional world I am creating in the series, additionally it made the project less specifically about one place and able to be interpreted more universally, beyond a local audience. The images include window displays,

parking lots, graffiti, empty malls, and discarded objects, and street scenes which become the setting or back drop for the human characters and adds to a sense of desolation to the imaginary world I have created.

While seemingly devoid of emotion, I argue that deadpan actually does portray an emotion, however it is a slightly cold, anonymous, flattened or deadened emotion. Deadpan photography has clear links to other themes I am exploring such as dislocation, and hauntology's claim of a that we are haunted by 'lost futures' as well as the New Zealand gothic notion of a haunted or uneasy landscape.



**Figure 10**

Harry Culy

*Untitled (Devyn), 2019, Mirror City*

From *Mirror City* (photobook)



**Figure 11**

Harry Culy

*Untitled (Caleb), 2019, Mirror City*

From *Mirror City* (photobook)

## 5. Place and Home: Connection and disconnection, ghosts and memories

*“You imbue them [places] with meanings and stories but they embed themselves in you, too. You take shape in and through their topographies, their climates, their light, their buildings, plants and spaces, the presence of people who occupy them with you, the traces of people there before you. You move, places change, but they leave their imprints. Even in an increasingly transient world, you take place with you as you go on.”*

(Horrocks and Lacey, 2003, p 107)

Much of my previous work has explored notions of place, home and identity. For example another recent ongoing series entitled *Rose Hill* is based in the wider geographical area of Hawkes Bay, an area of personal significance which is my *turangawaewae*. *Rose Hill* is the name of the farm where my mother and grandmother grew up, and the place we would travel to nearly every school holidays as children. *Rose Hill* attempted to reimagine my childhood memories and investigate my sense of simultaneous connection and disconnection to a place of personal importance.

My work in *Mirror City* builds on this aspect of my practice, interrogating notions of home and place and (dis)connection. As previously discussed, after being abroad for several years I returned to my hometown of Wellington, and was struck by the unnerving feeling of unfamiliarity in a place that I thought I knew extremely well. This shook my previous idea about home being something tangible, concrete and stable and led to a re-examination of my own concept of home.

The concept of a place to call home is something which forms a significant part of our personal identity. The world is in an increasing state of flux, and our sense of place within it is therefore often unstable, especially so as a young person who may have just left the family home, and is often in a heightened

state of transition; trying to find work, study, a place to live, and experimenting with different facets of identity.



**Figure 12**

Harry Culy

*Untitled (car), 2019, Mirror City*

From *Mirror City* (photobook)

The notion of home and place has been explored widely by academics, writers and artists. In *The Lure of the Local: Sense of Place in a Multicentred Society* Lucy Lippard suggests more work should be made by artists about places they are connected to. Lippard says in regards to artworks that explore 'place' that very few artists make art about their own, lived in, places and communities. She advises artists to deeply investigate their own environments, histories and communities in the spaces they are live, and are genuinely connected to (Lippard, 1997).

Lippard hopes that art emerges from artists who have a deep and engaged experience with the places and individuals where they live. Lippard suggests looking deeply at their *own* communities and environment as worth exploring, instead of travelling far and wide to examine *other* places and peoples. This inspired me to have confidence in the personal and local methodology I have used in *Mirror City*.

Martin Edmond has said “*To investigate something properly we need all three: archives, dreams, memories.*” (Edmond, 2016, p 213). This notion takes an investigation of ‘place’ further than just a fact based approach, and moves it into a space where “dreams and memories” are given as much importance as archives or facts. Through this synthesis of the factual, as well as more personal elements such as dreams and memories, we can more closely approximate human experience of a place, even if the process is vastly subjective.

Many photographers have used the concept of site-specific photography to explore one’s personal relationship to the landscape and its contents. Here in New Zealand artists have used this method to present diverse points of view. For example, In Derek Henderson’s poetic and descriptive large format colour series *Mercy Mercer* he lyrically explored his mother’s home town of Mercer in a similar style to Alec Soth. In *The Wanganui* Anne Noble investigated the place she was born with a series of atmospheric and emotive black and white photographs. Noble’s work is an “...*essay in the spirituality of place...*” (Art New Zealand, Sheridan Keith, 1983). Through moody images of the river and landscapes shrouded in mist, Noble shows us an interpretation of a site of personal significance that is both spiritually and emotionally intense.

I am aware that this is a well mined photographic methodology; however, I believe there is still space to build upon this personal and site-specific way of working from a younger person’s perspective at this uncertain point in our history, in this particular place.

*Mirror City* is in part about my relationship to my hometown, with figure 13 a good example of how we can merge archive, dreams (or the imaginary) and memories. The image depicts a site a short walk from my studio, a scene I have walked right by many times without really noticing it. Photographed straight on (deadpan), a set of twin doors is depicted in a flat grey lifeless tone. The doors have been boarded up, in a very crude and makeshift fashion perhaps symbolising something blocked off, hidden, or repressed, evoking a sense of hauntedness in the mundanity of the scene. Planks of wood are seemingly randomly nailed in, and almost resemble some kind of sculptural form.



Figure 13

Harry Culy

*Untitled (door), 2019, Mirror City*

From *Mirror City* (photobook)

The thing that drew me to make this photograph was the mysterious vertical beam on the right side of the frame, which is inexplicably only half painted. The pile of detritus seems to have been blown into the doorway, indicating it has been disused for a long time. Also, these were the doors to a place my siblings and I used to go to practise gymnastics as kids, which adds personal meaning for me. This notion of place or home being haunted, is bound up in the tradition of the New Zealand gothic.

## 6. Local gothic: reimagining the New Zealand gothic

*“Where is gothic? It’s in your neighbourhood, just around the corner.”*

- Martin Edmond (Kavka et al, 2006, p21)

A key part of my research over the last two years has been underpinned by the strong vein of the New Zealand gothic in local art, which challenges the idea that the everyday is mundane. As previously mentioned, after being overseas for several years, I came back to Aotearoa with a distinct sense of dislocation from this place that I considered home. As a result of this uncanny feeling I was drawn towards New Zealand’s gothic tradition, which seemed to echo my experience of being in a place that is simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar, both physically and psychologically.

New Zealand gothic does not often feature vampires, or haunted castles, it is more apt to obliquely hint at notions of dislocation, anxiety or a skewing of the familiar. Many artists have tapped into this notion and used it to explore the darker side of Aotearoa’s culture, however it is a very slippery term to define. Dr Jenny Lawn says its definition is unfixed, and can be understood in a variety of ways. Less overt than traditional gothic forms, Lawn says *“Gothic works in a manner more akin to a shifting warp of the familiar.”* (Kavka et al, 2006, p15). Others have defined New Zealand gothic as a kind of hauntedness in the landscape, a suggestion of dark and invisible forces or a sense of dislocation or anxiety. The editors of *Gothic New Zealand: the Darker Side of New Zealand Culture* suggest that Gothic is *“endemic to New Zealand's self-representation”*. (Kavka et al, 2006, p 15). Among these multiple definitions of the gothic, my interest in the gothic is especially related to the notion of dislocation, hauntings and anxiety. In *Mirror City* I have employed an oblique approach through intentional ambiguity, photographic technique, subject matter that alludes to dislocations, and atmosphere to express an unsettling mood of haunting mundanity.

Sam Neill examines the New Zealand gothic in relation to local films in *Cinema of Unease*. He cites the apparent undercurrent of darkness in local cinema through examples such as Peter Jackson's *Heavenly Creatures*, inspired by the 1954 Parker/Hulme murder in Christchurch, or Vincent Ward's unsettling *Vigil*, or the bleak apocalyptic science fiction film *The Quiet Earth*. A key example is Jane Campion's film *The Piano* set in 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial Aotearoa, which utilises enigmatic symbolism (an abandoned piano on a desolate beach), a mysterious mute female lead character, troubled yet erotic relations between colonists and Māori, all through a cold blue tinted atmospheric filmic treatment.

Visual artists too have explored how the New Zealand gothic may articulate anxieties of belonging, uneasiness and dislocation. The New Zealand gothic themed exhibition and publication *Unnerved* (2011) includes leading local artists, such as Lisa Reihana, Colin McCahon, Ronnie van Hout, Shane Cotton, Michael Parekowhai, and Bill Hammond. While there have been several Māori artists working in this area, the New Zealand Gothic is linked predominantly to Pākehā artists traditionally because of the link to the troubled history of colonialism, and their dislocation and anxiety to the land they find themselves simultaneously at home and not at home in.

*“For a country that projects such striking images of a pastoral paradise, clean and green it is perhaps surprising to find within the local culture a powerful presence of the Gothic....In New Zealand fiction, its literature and film, has repeatedly portrayed spaces of isolation, loss, and despair, of a rugged, wild, and treacherous land that can assail and entrap...its isolated communities disrupted by the arrival of an outsider, and a landscape that is seemingly “alive.” Kiwi Gothic reveals a post-settler society that appears unable to settle.”* (Punter, 2012, p 394)

In the medium of photography, diverse local practitioners such as Laurence Aberhart (who has photographed New Zealand as if it is the scene of a crime), Ann Shelton (especially in the mirrored and inverted landscape

diptychs of historical sites of violence in her *Public Spaces* series), and Yvonne Todd all work in different spheres within the New Zealand gothic lineage.

Gavin Hipkins' series *The Homely* is highly relevant to my work in *Mirror City*. In *The Homely* Hipkins depicts commonplace subject matter in often unorthodox ways through a series of photographic journeys across New Zealand and Australia between 1997 and 2000. Hipkins referred to this work as a "*post-colonial gothic novel*" (Hipkins, 2001, p 3) and in it he created his own interpretation of a haunted nation in a frieze of 80 colour pictures (figure 14).



**Figure 14**

Gavin Hipkins

*The Homely*

Installation view, 2001

*Courtesy of City Gallery Wellington*

The project aimed to explore themes of colonialism, and estranged notions of home and nationhood. Shot with a point and shoot style 35mm film camera, the photographs are sometimes blurry or out of focus, suggesting that the colonial sense of 'home' is out of focus, or out of reach. Curator Robert Leonard says

*The Homely* drew on the Lynchian trope of using both “overtly relevant images (a model ship’s rigging, a mock-Māori gateway, a model lighthouse, mud pools)” as well as “seeming obliquely connected or irrelevant images (a tyre swing, a takeaways menu, and a hooded jacket)...”. By connecting these different kinds of images, Hipkins creates a haunting, uncanny narrative, and an atmosphere of confusion, which resists simple interpretation, echoing the complicated Pākehā sense of belonging. Leonard concludes that “*The Homely is haunted by unfinished business; gritty fragments that resist integration into this empire of signs.*” *The Homely* alludes to a sense of dislocation, or multi centeredness, of Pākehā post settler community that is unable to fully settle in Aotearoa (Leonard, 2008).

Gavin Hipkins’ work is a key influence on my work, and while I acknowledge some similarities, (an interest in the New Zealand gothic as Pākehā, exploring notions of home, and wide ranging of subject matter) my work differs in several key ways. For example in *Mirror City* my focus is on one specific site that I have a very personal and local relationship to (Wellington). Another key difference is the formal contrast created in the images by using a large format camera on a tripod with monochrome film and especially my addition of human portraiture to the series as well as my presentation method. I recognise that the New Zealand gothic is bound up in the anxieties and darkness of colonialism, and this is something which adds to an uneasy sense of belonging and identity for Pākehā in Aotearoa, however I want to build on colonial understanding of New Zealand gothic, by thinking about the gothic in a broader sense for a younger generation, beyond its traditional understandings, as a further sense of anxiety and dislocation, the more unsettling for the vagueness of its object.

The New Zealand gothic theme arises in the work of various artists in very different ways. For example, In contrast to Gavin Hipkins, Yvonne Todd’s work has been described ‘North Shore gothic’. Her work explores a different vein of gothic which diverges from the colonial understandings of the tradition, and uses artifice and humour to obliquely examine broader themes of contemporary discomfort, dislocation and beauty.



**Figure 15**

Yvonne Todd

*January 2006*

*Archival photographic print*

*Courtesy of the artist*

Ruth McDougall has described Todd's depictions of women as glossy and synthetic, artificial and sickly (McDougall, 2010, p 156). Yvonne Todd often draws on the language of fashion and commercial photography, using lighting, costumes, sets, and paid models to accomplish this visual mood. What remains constant however is the ability of both Hipkins' and Todd's work to unsettle the viewer. "Gothic works in a manner more akin to a shifting warp of the familiar. ... gothic touches upon and skews the ordinary—world dimensions of domesticity, decorative form and psychological balance; it troubles them with aberration, with something that ought not to be there" (Lawn, 2006, p 15). In figure 15, a young woman is framed centrally in front of a plain grey backdrop,

wearing a satin quilted nightgown. The viewer may interpret strange and unsettling narratives when all the elements in the image are combined: the mysterious sugar cube in her hand, the overlarge bloodshot eyes, the desperate/tragic expression on the woman's face. While different to my photographic work, this novel interpretation of the New Zealand gothic gave me impetus to reimagine my own contemporary understanding of the gothic.



**Figure 16**

Harry Culy

*Untitled (window), 2019, Mirror City*

From *Mirror City* (photobook)

While I did not set out to consciously create overtly gothic work, a visual language has emerged through the production of *Mirror City* which finds itself situated in the lineage of New Zealand gothic. Several creative decisions have

led to the overall tone of my work. In particular my formal decisions, for example the use of monochromatic film, deadpan, and the preternatural stillness created by use of the large format camera on a tripod. Additionally I have contrasted the wide range of subject matter from overtly strange or gothic imagery through to the banal. There are obvious references to the gothic (the pentagram in figure 16 for example, or headless mannequins in figure 17) through to less overt approaches such as facial expression, unnaturally still poses, and oblique symbolism.



**Figure 17**

Harry Culy

*Untitled (mannequins), 2019, Mirror City*

From *Mirror City* (photobook)

A favourite device of the gothic is the twin or doppelgänger (such Ann Shelton's mirrored images in *Public Places* (Shelton, 2018, p). The title *Mirror City* refers to this doubling, and is also visually shown through sets of paired photographs used throughout the book. These pairs aim to subtly unsettle the viewer because they are only slightly different. For example, figure 18 depicts a young woman, shown twice. Each portrait is subtly different, creating a sense of temporal dislocation, and almost a visual ghosting, this plays with the viewer's perception, and also alerts them to the subjectivity inherent in photography. This and other techniques, subject matter and preoccupations of the New Zealand gothic echoed many of my key concerns in *Mirror City*.



**Figure 18**

Harry Culy

*Untitled (Eliza), 2019, Mirror City*

From *Mirror City* (photobook)

## 7. Hauntology: uncertain futures, photography, and young people.

*“The slow cancellation of the future.”*

- *Franco Berradi* (Berradi and Fisher, 2013 )

The New Zealand gothic is preoccupied by ghosts, doubles, haunting and dislocation. In Mark Fisher’s understanding of hauntology however, he says we are haunted by ‘lost futures’. I had previously understood haunting as relating to the past, so Fisher’s notion that we could be haunted by the future was interesting to me, especially in relation to photography’s strange relationship with time, at a time when the future seems uncertain to many young people (through the broader context of increasing anxiety around climate change, pollution, inequality and other political issues).

Mark Fisher picked up on the notion of hauntology from Jacques Derrida’s *Spectres of Marx*, where he proposed that western culture and society would be haunted by the death of Marxism. In Fisher’s book *Ghosts of my Life* (2014) he proposed that hauntology is the idea that we are haunted by a “*nostalgia for lost futures*” (Fisher, 2014) and used the term to describe art that interrogates a sense of temporal disjunction. Fisher also investigates hauntology in relation to popular culture, focusing on music, film, television and fiction. The notion, in hauntology, that time has been dislocated relates nicely to photography’s inherent dislocation of time through slicing moments from time and allowing them to live on in other times. Fisher states of hauntology: “*being is inherently haunted...*”, and, “*haunting [is] the state proper to being...*”, he adds that we are now in an era witnessing the cancellation of the future due to many factors such as neoliberalism, consumer culture, postmodernity. (Fisher, 2014).

While I agree with many of Fisher’s statements, I am less certain that the future is entirely lost; instead I believe that we have to reimagine the future and question the dominant structures that have led to the state of the world now. Hauntologists like Fisher believe that culture has lost its momentum and new

cultural forms are becoming rarer, adding that contemporary culture's recycling of retro aesthetics and incapacity to make many new "cultural forms" is a result of an inability to imagine a future. While I believe that truly novel cultural forms are becoming scarcer, I do not acknowledge that all pre-existing cultural forms are redundant. I believe that we can recycle existing forms and genres into, if not new, then more nuanced and transformed iterations that still have considerable cultural worth. My work draws on traditional existing cultural forms (the history of documentary photography, and the New Zealand gothic for example), however through reimagining these forms through contemporary concerns, unique results may be created.

*Mirror City* attempts to inherently link hauntology to my personal everyday experience. The photographs are being made in my immediate environment in my everyday life, while the young people are friends, acquaintances and strangers, who act as metaphors for the future – placeholders for my hopes and anxieties and dreams about the future.

Through my photographic work in *Mirror City* I wanted to explore the notions of hauntology's lost or uncertain futures in an oblique way. Formally, the use of black and white large format film added to the uncanny sense of a-temporality (the sense of unnatural stillness – people and places stuck in time). The subject matter hinted at various anxieties and dreams I have about the future, including loss (a burnt out building, empty lots, and disused objects and places), the degradation of the natural world (tree stumps, an absence of real animals, fake flowers, metal palm trees), of barriers or structures designed to keep people out (barred doors, glass, barbed wire, shiny mirrored buildings). Young people are pictured in transitional spaces not doing much, between actions (waiting at the bus stop, staring into the distance), in ambiguous, anonymous and uncertain places. *Mirror City* hints that the dreams of previous generations (stable work, owning a home) are becoming harder to achieve. Through the accumulation of these symbols, motifs and atmospheres in *Mirror City*, I hope to evoke an impression of haunting in everyday life, of uncertainty and

melancholy, and to elucidate the experience of growing up now, and the desire for a meaningful place to call home in an increasingly transient world.



**Figure 19**

Harry Culy

*Untitled (empty lot), 2019, Mirror City*

From *Mirror City* (photobook)



**Figure 20**

Harry Culy

*Untitled (Reid), 2019, Mirror City*

From *Mirror City* (photobook)

## **8. Presentation: photobook and exhibition**

*"I love the space between images. The things that happen when you turn the page, when you are looking at a new image with the ghost of the previous image lingering in your mind... I love the feel of being swept up, as if by a stream, by a book of photographs."*

(Halpern, 2018)

*Mirror City* is being presented in two different yet complementary forms: firstly as a photobook which contains 60 images, and secondly as a much tighter edit of large scale photographic prints as an exhibition installation. Displayed together in a traditional exhibition space, and echoing the title of the series, the two forms of presentation are intended to mirror and interact with each other, yet function differently in several key ways.

Photobooks are very important to my practice for several reasons. To me, photography is a medium where seriality is important, and I think of my work as less about individual images, and more about the aggregate experience of a series of images; in fact Robert Frank referred to photobooks as paper movies. In the *Mirror City* photobook, images working in the context of a bigger series means that they are physically connected to each other through the form of the book, and therefore the work as a whole becomes more important than individual images with the narrative or literary possibilities enhanced in comparison. Additionally, as my work comes from my personal experience, the intimate and personal experience of engaging with the book form was a great vehicle for showing the work. It also provides the opportunity to return to the series often. The photobook is now often seen as an art object in its own right.

While the photobook has its own limitations such as a rather small niche audience, and still costs a reasonable amount to purchase (though cheaper than exhibition prints), I still believe a photobook is the best way to present a full body of work and retain the material authorship of a project. Through using

the form of the photobook and its physicality (properties such as design, scale, sequence, text) an artist can create a unique experience for the viewer that enhances the concerns of the maker.



**Figure 21**

Harry Culy

*Concertina book trial, 2019*

Throughout my research I studied hundreds of different photobooks, and looked at influential photobook makers, researchers and different strategies. Much of my developmental work in the *Mirror City* photobook has centred on experimenting, editing and sequencing. Photobook historian and writer Gerry Badger says sequencing is generally an intuitive business, a matter of trial and error and much contemplation, testing out ideas as you progress (Badger, 2004). As mentioned above, most of the work was photographed in a methodology of intuitive collecting, and relying on chance encounters: this has created a large archive of seemingly disparate pictures, which took a long time to experiment with, edit and refine into a series. Once I had identified the key threads I was exploring in *Mirror City*, the editing and sequencing became a process of ordering and making meaning or narrative with fragmented bits of

reality, removing images that jarred me out of the world I was trying to construct, and adding in photographs that enhanced it. More effective editing has been made possible through a refinement of my thematic concerns, such as dislocation, and notions of unclear futures for young people.

In the experimental process I focussed on the relation between different images through arrangement on the page and sequencing, utilising various techniques like variation (wide shot, to close up, to portrait for example) , leit motif (abandoned or disused places and objects for example), rhythm, and doubled pairings. I began this process early on, and it has been ongoing throughout the project and creation of several book mock-ups, for example a concertina book design in figure 21. Through this process I ultimately wanted to create a book which takes the real world and forms a new kind of fiction that imaginatively investigated my thematic concerns. I placed the human subjects throughout the book as key protagonists in a familiar but unsettling world. I wanted the design to be striking and echo the mood of the work, but also simple enough to let the photographs take centre stage.

I experimented with all the design elements (size, paper, layout, cover, text, sequence). The design has been pared back to be relatively conventional (apart from perhaps the cover design and the deconstructed/industrial style exposed binding), so the pictures speak for themselves. With this in mind I created an intimate scale (close to a medium size diary) hardcover, section sewn book. Digitally printed on semi-gloss paper, in 108 pages I created a simple layout which had enough variation to keep it interesting for the viewer, but did not detract from the actual content of the work. The ambiguous narrative sequence of images compels the viewer to come to their own narrative understanding. Gregory Halpern says, of photobooks, that he is inspired by novelists' techniques of leaving narrative gaps: *"to be filled by the minds of their readers, suggesting meanings which readers might then take pleasure in creatively interpreting"* (Halpern, 2018). Halpern's approach resonated with my approach to *Mirror City*, which presents a perplexing narrative which hints towards implied

meanings, without explicitly indicating how the reader should understand the work.

Apart from the title, author's name, and colophon, there is no text inside the book to echo this ambiguity and anonymity, however I made a text collage which was digitally printed onto the front and back cover of the book. The typography is based on font from the Notes application in an iPhone where the text was collected. The text is similarly ambiguous, and deals with my own experiences, dreams and anxieties of my daily life and includes shopping lists, advertisements, and horror films I have seen recently, as well as ideas for pictures and other miscellaneous notes. The text has been collected in a similar way to how I collect images, paying close attention to what I encounter in my daily life. The text is intended to relate with the pictures inside the book, much like a title sequence in a television show, which is aimed to evoke a mood to interact with the contents of the book. In *Mirror City*, images are not identified with titles, suggesting ambiguity and obscurity.



**Figure 22**

Harry Culy

*Mirror City* photobook cover

In addition to the photobook I have made a selection of key images from the book printed at large scale (32x40 inches). These images are intended to complement the book. While a much smaller selection, they sum up and crystalize the themes I am exploring in the project. The exhibitions function differently to the photobook. The wall power of large scale prints lets a viewer engage bodily with the work at a immersive scale. The large works are unframed inkjet prints on semi-gloss baryta paper and have large white borders. The work is generously spaced, giving power to each image. All the work is printed at the same size to create a sense of cohesiveness amongst the wide range of subject matter. The sequence of the installation is also important, making links and groupings between images.



**Figure 23**

Harry Culy

*Mirror City*, installation test, 2019.

## **9. Conclusion**

The execution of this research project has brought me to the realisation that I have been creating an imaginary 'haunted coming of age novel' set in my home town through a series of black and white photos of young people and their urban environment.

*Mirror City* has forced me to deeply examine a place I assumed I knew well, and to re-imagine the preoccupations of a group of young people who live there, which includes but also extends beyond the personal.

Through the synthesis of documentary photography, my interpretation of the New Zealand gothic and aspects of hauntology, I have attempted to present a new way of looking at contemporary concerns – specifically the desire to connect to a place to call home, and secondly to examine the uncertainty for the future as young people journey from childhood into adulthood.

Utilising photography's key ability to function in the space between the real and imagined, *Mirror City* has attempted to reflect my subjective experience of trying to find a place to call home in an increasingly transient and fragmented world. I believe this echoes the dreams, challenges and anxieties that young people face in the world today. I have re-imagined the tradition of the New Zealand gothic to engage with broader notions of dislocation and anxiety, as well as hauntology's notion of lost futures, as a way to interpret my personal experience of growing up and belonging, and to articulate this to a wider audience

Ultimately, this work is an imaginary exploration of youth and disconnection, which utilises photography's unique role of recorder of fact, and as a vehicle of imagination. Beyond the "truth" of documentary photography and its tentative relationship to narrative, my work is used to embrace the ambiguities inherent in the medium, an uncertainty mirrored in the future of young people.

**Acknowledgements:**

I would like to thank the following people for help with this project:

Caroline McQuarrie, Wayne Barrar, Shannon Te Ao, Julieanna Preston, Mel Bogard, John Culy, Lucy Aitchison, Kendra Marston, David Cook, Anne Noble, Jane Wilcox, Shaun Waugh, my friends and family, and the Massey University staff who helped in any way. I would especially like to thank the people who let me photograph them for *Mirror City*.

Special thanks the Peter Turner Scholarship in Documentary Photography.

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